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To cite this article: Georgia Thomas-Parr (2023): Anime girls embodied: an introduction to British maid Café cosplay, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2194569](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2194569)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2194569>



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Published online: 24 Mar 2023.



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Anime girls embodied: an introduction to British maid Café cosplay

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ABSTRACT

Japanese media (including anime) offers representations of female characters that, in their cute girlishness, differ from mainstream representations of femininity in British media. In the UK, anime conventions are becoming increasingly popular, in which anime characters are brought to life via cosplay (“costume role-play”). This study observes maid cafés as a feminine-presenting cosplay phenomenon where participants perform as tropes of girl characters from anime, while dressed in a “kawaii” (cute) maid uniform. As this article observes, maid café cosplay is a “shōjo” (girl) phenomenon that relates to two concepts: “kawaii” (cuteness) and “moe”—an affectual, delighted response to that cuteness. Intended as an introduction to maid cosplay studies in a global context, the paper presents maid cosplay as a topic of interest to girlhood and feminist scholarship that reflects an underlying paradox at play: in spite of the discourses of fetishization underpinning the maid uniform, maid cosplayers feel liberated from the pressures of sexualisation in their presentation and performance as kawaii (cute), fictional shōjo (girl) characters.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 March 2022
Revised 13 March 2023
Accepted 16 March 2023



KEYWORDS

Girlhood; cosplay; anime; subculture; femininity

Introduction

Anime, a form of media originating in Japan, has gained widespread popularity due to the internet, in which anime conventions are emerging globally. Here, cosplay, a portmanteau of “costume” and “play,” is a participatory form of fan practice that is highly visible in anime conventions (Crawford and Hancock 2019, 106). From 2017 to 2019, based at 25 anime-related events in the UK, I observed cosplayers transform themselves into visions of what Angela McRobbie refers to as “the spectacularly feminine” (2009, 60). However, these were by no means conventional visions of femininity in a contemporary UK context: they were immature, hyperfeminine and, above all, *kawaii* (meaning “cute” in Japanese). Using auto-ethnography, interviews and participant observation, I immersed myself in those subcultural scenes where fantasies of imaginary girls in Japanese media were brought to life by young adults and teenagers.

In this article, I focus on one emerging cosplay subculture where the image of the girl is at its forefront: maid cafés. Here groups of cosplayers emulate youthful female personas

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that are based on the character tropes of girls in anime, exuding a spectacular femininity that is alternative to images of mainstream femininity in British media. Through maid cosplay, I define “the spectacularly feminine” as an achievement of femininity that is hypervisible (Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley, Avi Shankar 2010), luminous (Kearney 2015), youthful, and a vision of celebrity (Melanie. Kennedy 2018) that makes a drag-like spectacle of the subject through exaggerated behavior and consumer excess. Maid cosplay also relates to the concept of *shōjo* (girl), a term that emerged in Japan in the early 20th-century to refer to adolescent females who prolonged their girlhood via extending their period of education. This bears implications for those individuals in their emerging adulthoods who experience this position of *shōjo* through cosplay.

There are currently no studies of maid café culture in the UK, nor any that locate maid cafés as a feminine-presenting cosplay subculture from the perspectives of maids themselves. The maids I met might disagree with me referring to “maiding” (the act of being a maid) as cosplay, however. As one maid told me:

For me, [my maid persona] isn't cosplay, she's something unique. [...] Maids are [built over time]. We are constantly adding to our maids and collecting small items for their uniforms; the maids grow as if they're their own people.

The maid café environment was, in maids' words, dedicated to “cute girls in cute dresses.” Indeed, becoming a maid bears the lustre of being something *more* than cosplay. Nevertheless, my choice of referring to maiding as cosplay serves to recognise the performance of fictional characters and escapist processes of self-making within the context of anime fanculture (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Hei-Man Cheung 2012; Lamerichs 2014; Winge 2019).

The current scholarship on maid cafés in Japan generally observes maid cafés from the male customer's position (Patrick. Galbraith 2019; Luke. Sharp 2011). By contrast, this study locates maid cafés as a *feminine* phenomenon of British anime fandom and cosplay, interested in how maid cosplay might act as one of “the different ways in which we ‘work upon’ our bodies so as to become a self” (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010, 120), reflecting “the ways in which bodies become through their relations with images” (Coleman 2008, 163). If maid cosplay bears the aim of bringing fictional tropes of anime girlhood to life, what does it mean to experience a catharsis of femininity through embodying an imagined (anime) girl's body in a fantasy café setting? What is the phenomenological experience of becoming a maid, whose complex, ambivalent symbolism offers to both undermine and reinforce patriarchal ideologies underpinning mature and immature femininity? Here I highlight the inherent paradox of maid cosplay: participants feel they can present as feminine in a way that is not (and should not be) sexualised, even though the maid uniform itself is widely underpinned by discourses of fetishization. As I argue, we can work towards an analysis of maid cosplay as a masquerade that can destabilise compulsory objectification. This article makes a case for maid (and other girl-based, feminine-presenting) cosplay as a curious site of feminist intrigue, where the exploration of imagined girlhood bears reflects certain processes that are tied to femininity and coming-of-age.

What is a maid café?

Maid cafés are weird, but they're not sinister

(Charlotte, "Maid Reiko," age 28)

Maid cafés originated as cosplay cafés in Japan in the early 2000s, in which young women served customers as anime character archetypes in maid uniforms (Galbraith 2019; Sharp 2011). By extension, UK maid cafés are inspired by Akihabara-based maid cafés chains, in an area of Tokyo that is seen to be the home of a fanatic subculture of anime and manga enthusiasts with a primarily male demographic: "*otaku*" (Erica Baffelli, Keiko Yamaki 2018; Galbraith 2019). Maid cafés "allow for embodied interactions with fictional characters" and an "affective response triggered by these interactions" (Galbraith 2019, 213)—termed *moe*, which I discuss in due course. As maid cosplayers bring to life anime girl characters with their performance and dress, maid cosplay is thus a means of experiencing that fictional positionality and *moe* affect of the cute, anime girl character.

Maid cafés bear their own rules to which a customer must adhere upon entry: no touching (the maids), no photography, no soliciting maids' personal details, no wandering about the café—presumably as a way of protecting maids from any conduct that misinterprets the maid café's focus: to interact with sweet, innocent, fictional girl characters who bear no mature (sexual) knowledge or desire. There is also an unspoken, "mutual agreement" between customers and maids, which, similar to the girl-idol industry in Japan, is centered on illusions of "intimacy and reality," "availability, purity, and femininity" (Nelson 2021, 140; 143). Knowing participants of maid café culture enter into an agreement that, as a "2.5-dimensional" space (Galbraith 2019, 216), fictional girls are brought to life and inducted into maidhood via their uniform. The maid café's rules then, permit an exploration of the spectrum of possibilities contained within those rules, particularly those regarding gender, labor and power. Maid cafés make possible an unserious negotiation of these hegemonies, transforming socialization in a capitalist context (with its emphasis on a gender dichotomy; working a servile job) into a space of play. This is one example of the multifarious complexities that exist in maid space.

In Japan, maid cafés are often separate to butler cafés. Many British maid cafés, meanwhile, offer participants the option to cosplay as a butler (masculine-presenting) as well as a maid (feminine-presenting). As a study on femininity, I do not consider the masculine aspect of these cosplay groups, although, I suggest this as an area of interest for future scholarship. While maid cafés in Japan may be seen as lucratively orientating themselves around the experience of the male customer, maid café events in the UK tend to attract a mix of different genders, appealing more to a queer, feminine dynamic than the target cis-het masculine clientele of maid cafés in Japan¹. Unlike the UK, Japan has many established maid cafés, both chains and independent, open daily to members of the general public. UK maid cafés, tied to anime fanculture, usually exist as pop-ups at anime conventions or as pre-sold ticketed events at privately rented venues. Many groups are charities—I came across only one maid café that paid its members a wage on the approximately 8 days of events that happened annually. Moreover, UK maid café "customers" are primarily anime fans who are aware of the following: maid cafés and *kawaii* subcultures; anime as a media form with its own narrative style and aesthetics, and; (maid) cosplay as a form of escapism through interacting with fictional characters. While maid

cafés are booming businesses in Japan (Patrick Galbraith 2012), opening a maid café is generally not a money-making venture because British society is not conducive to, nor culturally compatible with, maid café culture. This is evident in the reception that British maid cosplayers receive from the general public: assumed to cater to pedophilic, hetero-masculine, erotic fantasy—even being termed “hooters for incels” (Saffron Otter 2023).

With the maid costume read as erotic, and the performance of maids exaggeratedly girlish, maid cafés are commonly met with suspicion in the UK because the image and behaviour of the maid ambiguously draws attention to the line between innocence and sexualization. The British-based maid café thus emerges in a context that conceptualizes girls as being at-risk (Harris 2004), paired with the common view that the maid uniform signifies fetishism. Maid cosplay is therefore of cross-cultural intrigue beyond Japan, in which we can discuss its hybridic affects and effects, noting how global participants must justify their involvement in maid cosplay outside of Japanese society and culture. We also need to recognise the “crisis of care” and loneliness in our digital age (Galbraith in Otter 2023), as the maid forms a symbiosis of doting between her and her customers (Patrick Galbraith 2017). This is femininity-as-care, used to mitigate the strains of an androcentric world.

Methods and participants

In 2019, for nine months, as part of a wider research project on anime fangirls and feminine-presenting cosplayers in British anime conventions, I conducted an immersive ethnography at eight maid café groups in England and Scotland. (To my knowledge, at that time, no maid cafés existed in Wales or Northern Ireland). I attended 13 maid café events (eight “slots”² as a customer; seven days as a maid) as well as eight rehearsals/dance practices. I draw on seven semi-structured interviews and, more informally, my conversations with maid cosplayers in the field. As a project undergoing supplementary research, this article is intended as a preliminary insight into maid cosplay subculture from a feminist perspective. My experience of becoming a maid cosplayer also fundamentally shaped my direction in this research and its emerging hypotheses.

All quoted cosplayers in this article were white, which somewhat reflected the demographic of many maid café cosplay groups in the UK. However, non-white maids played an important role in cafés that were more diverse³. This is a limitation of the study on my part in which I invite future studies to consider whether certain elements are at play that might explain why some maid café cosplay groups are less diverse; whether particular sites allow certain bodies to become more visible and spectacular than others. These intersectional elements are fundamental to painting a fully representational picture of the experiences of maid cosplayers worldwide. Moreover, it is important to recognise the racist discourses that are also illuminated by maid cosplay. Regardless of whether participants themselves recognised this issue or not, maiding highlights the maid stereotype as a potential weapon of sexual violence and racial misogyny towards Asian women, as well as embodying what we might observe as a “racist love of cute things” (Bow 2022, 75). This is an issue that has been acknowledged in other studies that observe western girls as emulating an Orientalist vision of Japanese femininity (O’Brien 2013) which I intend to address more comprehensively elsewhere.

Most of the maid café cosplay groups that I came across were founded and led by cisgender girls and women as well as non-binary and transgender people who were assigned female at birth. Although I do not go into detail about the maid café members' gender identities when they were out of role, I feel it is important to mention that, as strictly gendered as the maid café was, it attracted many individuals who were not cisgender. (In one maid café I observed, out of 16 active members, six were cisgender, seven were non-binary and two were transgender). As I discovered, it was erroneous to assume that, due to their hyperfeminine presentation as maids, participants identified as female. Indeed, many of the maid cosplayers that I met did not identify with the gender they had been assigned at birth (female). I began to see maid cosplay as a performance of drag, and yet, this was a performance that differed from the mature sensuality associated with drag queens. This led me to conceive the term “girl drag” where one becomes resplendent and transcendent as a girlish *shōjo* character (Thomas-Parr 2021).

Although my calculations are contestable (for the fact that maid cafés can readily appear and disappear in the UK), there were nine maid cafés that were active during my research project (from 2017–2019). I observed as many groups as possible with varying degrees of depth to anonymize participants more easily, which was an ethical necessity because of the small number of groups in the UK⁴. Importantly, I learned that every maid café in the UK bears its own nuances, making them difficult to generalize. However, the one overriding similarity that all maid cafés share is their orientation around *shōjo* (as a sensibility, subculture, and symbol) which I will explore following this next section.

Maid cafés as a (post) feminist issue

When I encountered a maid café for the first time at an anime convention, I remember feeling an ambivalence towards what initially appeared to be a (post)feminist abomination. Girls playing servant to the “master” of a mansion—a man—who they “welcome home”⁵ and serve in a hyperfeminine, infantile way, wearing what appears to be a variation of a “French maid” costume. As evident in the maid’s contradictory surface appearance (child-like, sexy), behaviour (submissive, feminine), and context (confined to the domestic sphere), was this a pre- and post-feminist fantasy that satiated a sinister patriarchal gaze? To complicate matters further, maid cafés themselves originated from erotic games (Galbraith 2019) even though mainstream maid café services are not sexual (in Japan and the UK)⁶. While the literature on maid cafés asserts that maid cafés aim to cultivate a pure-hearted atmosphere of childhood innocence (Galbraith 2019; Baffelli and Yamaki 2018), we might nevertheless consider the implications that this may have regarding a postfeminist sensibility, concerning, as Rosalind. Gill (2007, 149) states,

a shift from objectification to subjectification (...) a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a “makeover paradigm;” a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked “resexualization” of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.

A postfeminist critique of maid cafés is emerging, where Nakamura (2021) has discussed the issue of affective labor experienced by maids who use social media to market their personas. We might therefore recognize maid cosplay as demonstrating how “neoliberal globalisation puts postfeminism into transnational motion and circulation” (Dosekun 2015, 1378). Due to

its excessively spectacular appearance that is achieved through neoliberal acts of self-making and consumerism, maid cosplay potentially illustrates a “postfeminist ‘rhetoric’ of choice” (Kennedy 2018, 16). We can also use maid cosplay to inquire into postfeminist discourses of empowerment, reclamation of self, and bodily and behavioral self-regulation (Diane. Negra 2008). Becoming a maid is an accessible, “attainable” feminine ideal (An. Nguyen 2016, 24) that can be achieved by anyone who has the financial means.

As a feminist researcher, I wanted to represent participants’ views of maiding as a form of self-empowerment that attempted to detract from, yet was evidently embedded in, patriarchal definitions of femininity. However, we should avoid the trap of debating to what extent maid cosplay is patriarchally derivative or subversive. Rather, the key insights lie in identifying maid cosplay as a site of postfeminist ambivalence that reflects the choices emerging women are offered and how young people negotiate them.

Maid cosplay as a site of *shōjo* sensibility, subculture and symbolism

The Japanese term, *shōjo* (girl) refers to multiple areas: a genre of manga aimed at girls; girls’ culture; the liminal period between girlhood and womanhood, and; a symbol of girlhood. As the concept of *shōjo* originally referred to girls who continued their education, delaying their entry into patriarchally-defined womanhood by avoiding legislated heterosexual relations and their consequences (marriage and motherhood), *shōjo* is rooted in the evasion of adult responsibility (Treat 1993), which, as a female experience under a patriarchal paradigm, relates to matters of virginity. Importantly, *shōjo* signifies an anxiety or ambivalence towards growing up. This is key to understanding the motivations of individuals who choose to cosplay as (virginal and innocent) maids in a UK context. The *shōjo* is a site of paradox, and, in cosplaying as a fictional anime girl character, one becomes associated with those elements that her symbolism upholds: liminality and subversiveness (Tomoko. Aoyama 2005). Maid cafés are thus sites of tension and ambivalence, offering participants the means of playing with, experiencing, negotiating, challenging and blurring dichotomies of “masculinity versus femininity, domination versus subordination, and subject versus object” (Takeyama in Galbraith 2017, 26)—and, as I would extend, dichotomies of innocence versus (sexual) maturity, and cuteness versus sexiness.

Observed as a position of perpetual transitioning and “transgendering” (Aoyama 2005, 54), the *shōjo* bears a “yearning” for “a neutral sex” (Kanai, in Aoyama 2005, 54). Girlhood becomes a means of interpreting the world and its logic, where “‘girl consciousness’ [is] a peripheral position” (Takahara 2006, 190). In this way, the girl becomes “a model of subversion for other marginalized social or cultural selves” (Aoyama and Hartley 2010, 8). *Shōjo*, then, is a sensibility that can go beyond, but is nevertheless distinctly tied to, the affectual experiences of girls. It is a position that Masako Honda describes as “neither and both” (in Aoyama 2010, 39), which is crucial to understanding the motivations and perspectives of maids and other cosplayers of *shōjo* worldwide. These tensions and paradoxes become manifest in *shōjo*-oriented subcultures in the UK and Japan alike. The *shōjo* consciousness of participants came through in my interviews, conversations and observations with them, where I observed a *shōjo* sensibility (Choi 2016) in participants’ shared affinity of feeling differently in the world as young adults, existing between the margins of gender hegemony. *Shōjo* culture resonates worldwide with those who

affectively position themselves, respond to, and/or identify with *shōjo* because of its evocation of, and escapism into, otherworldly realms where femininity is both autonomous and shielded from androcentric, patriarchal norms. *Shōjo* is also fascinated with androgyny, asexuality and neutrality, which translates into *shōjo*-oriented and *kawaii* subcultures worldwide. As with maiding, individuals who cosplay as *shōjo* evoke the symbolic girl's denigrated, subversive, and liminal characteristics—a means of undermining a patriarchal authority via a feminine positionality. Cosplaying as a girl works to symbolically prolong a period of feminine liberation, agency and freedom—that temporary period where girls can, and are, actively encouraged to exert their voice, autonomy and creativity. In line with other scholars of *shōjo* subcultures (Masafumi. Monden 2019), I consider the possibility that some individuals in the UK, who grew up under the assigned label of girl in the 1990s and beyond, might turn towards the *shōjo* as a site of femininity that is perceivably different from the mature (hyper)sexuality commonly found in depictions of women in Anglo-European media. Maid cosplay becomes an alternative mode of becoming *vulnerably* feminine that is nonetheless spectacular, excessive and contingent on consumption—all markers of a capitalist scape that constructs and connects global femininities through consumer products (Christine Yano 2013).

We should also recognise that the demographic of men, termed *otaku*, with which maid cafés in Japan are associated, is also curiously grounded in *shōjo* culture (Galbraith 2019). This is a result of the changing gender roles in society following the collapse of Japan's Bubble Economy in the 1990s where the ideology of man's breadwinner role was put into jeopardy. Scholars relate this as having had certain effects in Japanese society, such as an increase of single men living alone, a decline of the birth rate and a broken family system (Allison 2014). The figure of the *shōjo* pacifies this anxiety regarding manhood, offering escapism from societal expectations of a productive corporate lifestyle and nuclear family, in the form of girl idol groups, maid cafés, anime and manga characters, and dolls (Galbraith and Karlin 2012; Storyville 2018; Nast 2017). The connection between *shōjo* and *otaku* lies in the girl's symbolic ability to mitigate the anxiety of growing up, forming a central tenet of my research: how *shōjo* may be associated with the leisure and pleasure of a heterosexual, cis-male audience in Japan, and; how individuals (neither heterosexual nor cis-male) who are in (or once experienced) the position of *shōjo* (as marginalized girlhood), re-appropriate *shōjo* subcultures and symbolism for the purposes of playing with and imagining an alternative, empowered feminine self.

Whereas *shōjo* culture in Japan often draws upon historical European imagery (maid cafés are based upon imaginings of Victorian England, for example), for maid cosplayers in the UK, the geographical and cultural distance of Japan adds to this fantasy of maid café culture (Napier 2007). This is what connects *shōjo* from all over the world: the feeling of otherness; longing for foreign worlds outside the societal, temporal restrictions one may face in daily life, and; an affective, imaginative delighting in those elements that relate to *kawaii*, to which this next section is dedicated.

Maid cosplay as *kawaii* and *moe*

Maid cosplay allows participants to become hypervisible and hyperfeminine in ways that complicate patriarchal definitions of girlhood and womanhood. Dichotomies of innocence and maturity are undermined via the performance of a character (and caricature) of girlhood

that has ties to two further elements that underpin the maid café scape: *kawaii* (cuteness) and *moe* (the affectual response to that cuteness). Like *shōjo*, these concepts are crucial to our understanding of maid cosplay. *Kawaii* encompasses more than just cuteness; it is an aesthetic and consumer phenomenon that bears an affectual globalizing influence (Yano 2013); a fashion subculture (Masafumi. Monden 2015), and; its own discipline (cute studies) in academia (Dale 2016). Nittono (2016, 81) defines *kawaii* as follows:

kawai-i (adjective) (1) looks miserable and raises sympathy. pitiable. pathetic. piteous. (2) attractive. cannot be neglected. cherished. beloved. (3) has a sweet nature. lovely. (a) (of faces and figures of young women and children) adorable. attractive. (b) (like children) innocent. obedient. touching. (4) (of things and shapes) attractively small. small and beautiful. (5) trivial. pitiful. (used with slight disdain).

Kawaii, contradictory by nature, shares an affinity with its paradoxical sister, *shōjo*. Tied to girlhood, *kawaii* not only takes the form of cute consumer products oriented towards girls and young women, but also bears the marker of denigrated girls' culture (Dale 2022; Sianne. Ngai 2012). This intertwining of *shōjo* and *kawaii* (girls and cuteness) becomes epitomized through maid cosplay, where, as Nguyen (2016) notes, "*Shōjo* is a key, granting access to the experiences of knowing and feeling *kawaii*" (21). Maid cosplay, as a form of becoming *shōjo*, is one of these keys through which participants may experience what it is like to know and feel *kawaii*.

Both *kawaii* and *moe* have different etymological developments and scholarships, in which we might apply *moe* as a term of specificity for affective interactions in the maid café from the customer's perspective (Galbraith 2017), whereas *kawaii* is more commonly related to the scholarship of girls' subcultures such as Japanese fashion (Monden 2015). While we should avoid conflating *kawaii* with *moe*, both concepts are important for discussing maid cafés from the position of maids themselves. We can draw out those entanglements where both concepts meet, primarily via the symbol of *shōjo*. All three elements, *kawaii*, *moe*, and *shōjo* can be seen as thwarting, and enchanting a patriarchal gaze. We may use the scholarship of *kawaii* fashion subcultures as a means of understanding the motivations of maid cosplayers. Characteristic of the *shōjo* condition, maid cosplay is a means of becoming symbolically feminine that is unable to be—or rather, *should not be*—perceived as sexually desiring or desirable in her state as a girl. As Masafumi Monden recognizes in his (2015) study of *shōjo* and *kawaii* fashion subcultures, "girlish yet asexual, innocent yet autonomous 'cute' (...) serves as an alternative to the established multiple binaries of aggressive sexualization and subservience in which young women tend to be represented, particularly in but not exclusive to Euro-American culture" (104). While Japanese culture bears its own sexualizing discourses concerning *kawaii*, *shōjo* subcultures nevertheless provide the space for a subtle, soft and "delicate revolt," where participants "appear girlish and cute while being segregated from obvious sexualization" (78) as a means of rebellion against the heterosexualization of mature femininity in Euro-American media.

This was echoed in the testimonies of the maids that I met who cited maid cosplay as a means of performing a cuteness that was disallowed to them in their position as legal adults in a conventional UK setting. As one maid, Poppy (age 23), told me:

Being a maid allows me to explore this *cute dimension* to myself which I ordinarily can't. (...) Some people who aren't aware of maid café culture think that being a maid is something sexy or sinister—when it isn't like that at all! Being a maid is supposed to be something innocent.

When I'm a maid I feel like I can be cute and goofy, which is such a freeing feeling to be able to express a love of cute things without the usual pressures from society to be (...) cool or sexual. You can literally just be sweet and innocent.

For Poppy, maid cosplay allowed her to perform and dress in a way that escaped normative expectations of “cool or sexual” femininity in the UK. Becoming a *kawaii* girl character offers release from pressures of maturity, where “goofy” behavior enhances cosplayers’ doings of *kawaii* girl anime tropes. *Kawaii* then, brings an opportunity for playfulness (Dale 2020) that may otherwise be disallowed under the rules of socially acceptable womanhood. As Sianne Ngai states, “the experience of cute depends entirely on the subject’s affective response to an imbalance of power between [the subject] and the object” (2012, 54). So what does it mean to experience this imbalance of power from the position of the *kawaii* object in girl form? What might “cuteness [as] an aesthetic of powerlessness” (2012, 22), suggest about the people with whom it resonates and their feelings of autonomy within their own cultural contexts? Does becoming the cute object who can affect the “master” with its vulnerability, offer a means of complicating and subverting power imbalances within a gender binary?

Complicating the cute/sexy dichotomy

In theme with the paradoxes inscribed into the figure of *shōjo*, *kawaii* has its own paradoxes and ambivalences, bearing, as Christine Yano notes, “connotations of the cute and the feminine” where notions of sexiness are “embedded” (2013, 6). Indeed, both *shōjo* and *kawaii* bear their own “conceptual duplicity,” “one being an idealized construction imposed by older males, and the other being embraced and possibly manipulated by girls themselves” (Monden 2015, 85). Maid cosplay is tied to discourses of fetishization which reflects the extent to which patriarchal ideologies shape lived experiences of girls and women. Indeed, Yano’s (2013, 15) discussion of the Japanese schoolgirl uniform is pertinent to the maid uniform:

the same uniform meant to contain sexuality becomes itself a tantalizing, sexualized icon. That desire draws not so much on bodies and uniforms—although these are necessary objects of scopophilic attention—but on the powerlessness and passivity they inscribe. It is the erotic charge of innocence as foreplay, of guilelessness as sexual position.

Similarly, maid cosplay is a uniform that tantalizes via this “erotic charge of innocence as foreplay.” As *kawaii* revolves “around eroticized disparities of power” (Ngai 2012, 51), maid cosplay embodies these power disparities in its configuration of the tensions between naivety and eroticism, innocence and maturity, subservience and dominance. With its frilly apron and dress, the maid uniform symbolizes and epitomizes feminine, domesticized subservience. However, by donning a maid uniform and *kawaii*ifying it, participants also wield the potential subversive power of *dismantling from the inside* patriarchal ideologies and assumptions of femininity. In this way, maid cosplay, as being another example of a cute containment of the erotic, precariously flirts between patriarchal desire; ironic, postfeminist empowerment, and; autonomous, feminist rebellion.

Another *shōjo*-oriented subculture that troubles assumptions of sexualization and autonomy in a Euro-American context is *lolita*⁷, a feminine-presenting style of *kawaii* Japanese fashion inspired by Victorian and rococo-style European aesthetics. Despite

bearing the same name as Vladimir. Nabokov (1955) novel about a man's sexual desire for a young girl, the *lolitas* that I met rejected this, saying: "The focus is modesty and being beautiful without being too objectified." Likewise, maid cosplayers repudiate any misunderstanding that their hobby is directed towards a predatory gaze. Similar to *lolitas*, maid cosplayers "adapt [patriarchal] ideals of femininity to work within their own lives and personal philosophies" (Nguyen 2016, 21). The scope of this article means that I cannot go into depth on *lolita* J-fashion. However, what connects *lolita* with maid cosplay may be found in three particular areas: *lolita* J-fashion and maid cosplay are *kawaii* dress subcultures that, although derived from Japan, hybridically gain elements of their aesthetics from (historical) Europe (Monden 2015, 2020); they both bear a suspect association between adult men and little girls, highlighted in a British context where the moral panics of pedophilia are pronounced (McCartan 2010) and the British reportage on girl-centered media phenomena in Japan arguably sensationalize these elements (e.g., Stacey Dooley Investigates: Young Sex for Sale in Japan 2017), and; they both draw on the aesthetic of *kawaii* as a means of affirmation, self-empowerment and agency that goes beyond "the monolithic idea that perceives girlish/feminine appearances as endorsing passive objectification" (Monden 2015, 117).

Although *lolita* J-fashion should not be conflated with cosplay, many of the maid cosplayers that I met were also *lolitas*. One participant, Abbie (age 28), had been cosplaying as a maid and wearing *lolita* J-fashion as a hobby for several years⁷:

Lolita fashion helps me feel feminine and beautiful without feeling sexy, if that makes sense? There is zero sexiness in *lolita*, and you need that sometimes—because I think there's a lot of pressure on women to always appear sexually appealing—and I don't need that all the time (...) I can be feminine and elegant and beautiful without the need for the edge of sexiness. And the maid café stuff is an absolute outlet for me (...) I'm wearing a maid outfit right now but I'm [at] a convention so it's okay. People will look at everybody else, not just me. (...) When I have something like the maid café to come to I can really go crazy with my makeup and (...) my accessories (...) and I know that (...) nobody is singling me out and staring at me.

Abbie's interview highlighted the subjective underpinnings of the maid cosplayers and *lolitas* that I met: their engagement with maid cosplay and *lolita* sought escape from sexual objectification. Indeed, the "unguarded innocence" (Galbraith 2012, 94) that underpins maid cosplay is telling if we consider puberty as being the time when girls learn to *guard* themselves against a sexualizing gaze. In wearing *lolita* and maid cosplay, Abbie felt liberated from the normalized female paranoia of daily life: sexual objectification and harassment. Maid cafés, *lolita* and other *kawaii* subcultures that are inspired by Japan use the image of the girl to offer a symbolic refuge for cosplayers to reclaim autonomy of their own bodies, to revel in a femininity that overrides sexualization and objectification (Carriger 2019; Monden 2019). For Abbie then, maid cosplay (and *kawaii*-based subcultures) allowed her to reclaim and define her femininity for herself via embodying and evoking symbolic *shōjo*. The paradoxical nature of *shōjo* and *kawaii* subcultures make them attractive for the exploration and re-definition of femininity, girlhood and womanhood, as being complicatedly bound to hegemonic, dichotomous understandings of power. Maid cosplay is thus an intriguing

mask that can threaten a patriarchal power via its complex and troubling relation to desire.

Kawaii phenomenology

While maid café studies tend to focus on the position of the male customer within the symbiotic relationship of master and maid—in which the term *moe* (rather than *kawaii*) is applied—I wish to extend the scholarship of *kawaii* self-presentation to maid cosplay (adorning oneself with *kawaii* consumables and dress, embodying a *kawaii* character) to ponder the phenomenology of becoming that cute object that triggers *moe* in another person. What does it mean to become the *moe* object of adoration and delight for the assumed Master to whom we, as maids, are subservient? (This power dichotomy is blurred in the maid café environment nonetheless). *Moe* is integral to the maid café experience for both customer and maid alike (Galbraith 2019) in which *kawaii*, as an essential aspect of *shōjo* subcultures and sensibilities, is fundamental to enhancing the aesthetic presentation of maids as fantasy anime girl characters. Dependent on the ability to present and perform as *kawaii* girls, maid cosplayers elicit *moe* in those bodies that encounter them. To take this further, we can explore the affect and “empowerment” that a maid cosplayer might experience in provoking a *moe* response in her customers.

When asking participants what drew them to maiding in the first place, many expressed their memory of having an affectual response to seeing a cute maid. Poppy told me how she first knew she wanted to become a maid: “I came across it on the internet one day and I thought, ‘Wow! I want to be cute like that!’.” Becky (age 26) also relates to this feeling,

You know when you see [maids]—it’s like, “Oh my god, I would love to wear a cute little outfit like that! It’s absolutely adorable!” (. . .) It’s kind of like I’m still living in a dream. Am I really a maid from a maid café?

If *moe* is an epiphanic response to a character’s cuteness (Galbraith 2017), then might it be possible that Poppy and Becky’s motivation to become a maid grew out of *moe* affect? Or was this simply a response to *kawaii* (as opposed to *moe* specifically)? I pose these questions because cosplaying as a *kawaii* maid might offer the individual a means of experiencing what it is like to arouse *moe* in another person—leading to a realization of oneself as being euphorically cute, and thus marking success in one’s “doings” of femininity (while also using girlhood as a countermeasure to societal impositions of womanhood). Arousal is the key word here, particularly if we are to consider maid cosplay as arguably offering the means of becoming empowered via a postfeminist and patriarchally celebrated image.

What is the phenomenology and affect of becoming a *kawaii*, girl persona who can trigger a *moe* response in others? If hotness and visibility are translated into the “erotic capital” of a postfeminist subject (Winch 2013, 24), then might there be a *moe* capital in being both hypervisible and cute? This power, as found in cuteness and hotness alike, is dependent on a certain attention in order to gain its worth. Maid cosplay might offer participants a means of gaining visibility as an object of desire that is not so dissimilar from conventionally espoused images of women in British media that are oriented around youthful hotness. If “[p]

ostfeminism fetishizes female power while keeping it within firm limits” (Negra 2008, 4), the maid costume might literalize this statement, being contingent on illusions of neoliberal agency that are ultimately desirable to a patriarchal agenda (Gill 2007). Does the maid cosplayer embody *shōjo* as an experimentation with (and preparation for) neoliberal womanhood, positioning herself as the “subject of her own objectification” (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010, 121)?

Regardless, maids told me they did not seek an objectifying gaze. The aim was to become pure with the ability to purify. Maid cosplay may be read as signifying pre-modern, pre-feminist, imaginings of girlhood that existed before the radical shift in discourses of childhood innocence, following the popularisation of Sigmund Freud’s theories which defined female adolescence via medicalized, psychosexual parameters (Driscoll 2002). Prior to this, as Kristen Hatch notes, performances of girlhood in early 20th-century film invited a “juvenated rather than a pedophilic gaze; rather than being transformed into sexual objects, child impersonators were capable of transforming their spectators into innocent subjects” (Hatch 2015, 35). This is crucial if we are to properly understand maid cosplayers, who, as girl impersonators, disarm the objectifying gaze with their cuteness, rejecting conventional interpretations that assert that feminine vulnerability is equivalent to passive objectification and powerlessness. Maid cosplay draws on the subversive, vulnerable force of *kawaii* and *shōjo* that can thwart a hegemonic, patriarchal gaze (Monden 2019). What we might ask is whether there is more room in Japanese media and society for a gaze—as opposed to a more explicit pandering to the sexual desire of an eroticizing “male” gaze—which obscures the boundary between innocence and maturity. This is something that Yano also recognizes when she states, “Through the blurred image of the *shōjo*, the line between innocence and sexuality, between childhood and adulthood is not so neatly drawn in contemporary Japan” (2013, 55).

Maid cafés are evidently a stance against the “adultifying” of childhood (Jackson and Vares 2011, 700) as well as the tendency in British media to reflect ideal femininity as being constructed “around sexual confidence and autonomy” (Gill 2003, 103). What is intriguing about the maid figure is not necessarily whether she disavows or provokes sexualization. Rather, in a British context, the maid’s *kawaii* appearance makes the very fact of her sexualization remarkable, where, in the case of the normative position of women in UK society and media, sexualization often goes unquestioned. By contrast, in cosplaying as a maid, one plays the game of disavowing the (hetero)sexual(ized) destiny of productive, mature femininity via becoming a fantasy of liminal, fictional girlhood.

Maiding ultimately highlights the potential of *shōjo*-presenting cosplay and fashion to turn the onus of the objectifying gaze back on the gazer. Under maids’ assertions that the costume is not erotic, we might interpret the maid uniform as acting as a metaphor for tween and teen girls’ unwanted sexualization experiences; their bodies being read as sexual against their own phenomenology and will. By taking an image that is a symbolic epitome of erotic, patriarchal desire and transforming it into something cute and ambivalent, do maid cosplayers work to rewrite their own personal histories of objectification via the very costume that has culturally developed under these parameters? Maid cosplay troubles an unconscious and sexualising bias, in which the response that maid cosplay automatically triggers in

an unknowing, non-*shōjo* audience (repulsion, concern, erotic desire) invites us to examine our own personal relation to femininity as a position coded by compulsory sexualization.

Conclusion

Via maid cosplay, the fantasies of girls are brought to life by individuals who connect with *shōjo* as a lived experience, sensibility and symbol. Here the concepts of *kawaii*, *moe* and *shōjo* (and their respective scholarships) interconnect. By cosplaying as excessively *kawaii*, fictional *shōjo* characters, maids trigger a *moe* response. Participants, as embodied *shōjos*, animate fictional fantasies of girlhood (Galbraith 2019), and in so doing, take on the subversive, liminal, contradicting ambivalences of the symbolic girl. Maid cosplay manifests as a rebellion against mainstream depictions of femininity in UK media, fulfilling a desire by participants to simultaneously present as feminine and evade sexualization, transforming themselves into *kawaii* tropes of anime and playfully undermining the socializing impetus we experience as legal adults (from sexual maturity to financial labor). The *shōjo*, in her girlish guise, offers a symbolic respite from normative representations of mature femininity in UK media and society that are subjectified, hetero and hypersexual. Moreover, the cute/sexy ambivalence of maid cosplay draws attention to patriarchal and heteronormative conceptualizations that separate womanhood from girlhood.

As a symbol of the girl who evades sexualization and the responsibilities of womanhood, maid cosplayers evoke the paradoxes of *shōjo*: they resist discourses of socialized maturity while nonetheless experiencing a fantasy narrative of domesticated femininity and financial labor; they resist the sexualization that patriarchally defines womanhood, under a fetishistically-implicated guise. The subservient, frill-clad maid also carries elements of a postfeminist sensibility, implicitly reflecting processes of female socialization and power as being related to a negotiation of becoming that object of desirability, tied to converging ideals of cuteness and sexiness. Maid cosplay blurs boundaries and binaries that are inherent to structures of hegemonic power, reflecting the psychic negotiation involved in coming of age as a female subject. As girls and women encounter sexualization on a regular basis, what if it was possible to create an environment for femininity to flourish away from a denigrating and sexualizing gaze? Maid café cosplay groups in the UK are created with this intention. The critical interest here is not whether maid cosplayers are read as eroticized by outsiders. Rather, the significance lies in how maid cafés operate as spaces where individuals feel motivated to participate because they perceive becoming an anime-inspired *shōjo* as an opportunity to present as feminine while avoiding unwanted sexualization. This is cute liberation in girl form.

Notes

1. The predominantly queer demographic of maid cosplayers relates to a *shōjo* sensibility that Robertson (1998) identifies as “heterosexual inexperience and homosexual experience” (65).
2. Maid cafés are different from conventional cafés because there is a set time limit. Customers experience the maid café’s ritualistic itinerary (consuming *kawaii* food and drinks, interacting with maids, taking a polaroid “*cheki*” together) before leaving within the allocated window, or

“slot.” In the UK, a maid café event can have multiple slots on a day, with each one lasting between one and three hours.

3. Out of the eight cafes that I observed, six were wholly comprised of white staff. Black and Asian maids and butlers had a strong presence in the more diverse maid cafés I observed, and it is my intention to reflect this more strongly in my continuing research.
4. Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the committee of the author’s institution during timeframe of the research project.
5. “Okaerinasaimase” is how maids greet their customers, a formal way of saying “welcome home.”
6. In the words of one participant, “seedy” maid cafés do exist in Japan. (I did not come across such a cosplay group in the UK). However, for the most part, maid cafés are framed around childlike innocence.
7. Participants told me not to capitalize the “l” in lolita, in their rejection of the term’s association with the novel by Nabokov’s (1955).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council and Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation for funding this research, and Joshua Dale for his insights on an earlier draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This project received funding from The Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/J500215/1; and Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation under Grant 5452

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